
Identification of Illadopsises *Illadopsis* spp in the Upper Guinea forest

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Résumé: Les grives-akalat sont très difficiles à identifier de façon spécifique. Leur plumage terne et leur comportement vif, et pourtant furtif, rendent leur identification un défi, que même les ornithologues les plus expérimentés trouvent difficile. Les problèmes sont exacerbés par la bibliographie qui est conçue pour des personnes travaillant dans des musées, ce qui fait que les caractéristiques de terrain les plus importantes ne sont pas détaillées et les descriptions sont souvent comparatives et pratiquement sans utilité pour un observateur inexpérimenté face à un oiseau particulier. Nous avons trouvé, qu'avec de la patience et un oiseau relativement complaisant, la plupart des grives-akalat sont identifiables sur le terrain lorsque les caractéristiques de diagnostic du plumage sont connues. Cette communication tente de souligner ce que nous considérons être une approche utile à l'identification des grives-akalat sur le terrain, fondée sur nos observations des oiseaux sur le terrain et sur l'étude de spécimens en cage et dans les musées. Nos observations s'appliquent uniquement aux oiseaux avec un plumage adulte.

Illadopsis species are very difficult to identify. Their drab plumages and volatile, yet skulking, behaviour combine to pose an identification challenge which even the most experienced of ornithologists find tricky. The problems are compounded by the literature, which is tailored for use by museum workers. Consequently, the more important field characters are not detailed and the descriptions are often comparative and nearly useless to an inexperienced observer faced with an individual bird.

We found that with patience and a fairly accommodating bird most illadopsises are identifiable in the field, when the diagnostic plumage characters are known. This paper is an attempt to outline a useful approach to the field identification of illadopsises, based on our observations of birds in the field and study of trapped and museum specimens. As far as we are aware our observations apply to birds in adult plumage only.

We will not attempt to describe the plumage of each species in detail, but point out the most useful characters. For detailed descriptions see the excellent accounts of Bannerman². We have emphasised the visible field characters for these species; details of their calls and songs are found on Chappuis³.

The development of field identification techniques is an ongoing process and errors are likely; our aim is to help future observers, but we stress that further work is needed.

Geographical coverage

Our observations were in forested areas of Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire thus we limit this paper by necessity to the species that occur in the Upper Guinea forest block.

The Upper Guinea forest stretches from Guinea in the west to the Dahomey Gap in the east. This forest block has a distinctive avifauna, which has increasingly been the focus of ornithological attention since the African Bird Red Data Book⁵ highlighted the plight of ten forest birds endemic to the region. Five species of illadopsis occur (Table 1), of which one, Rufous-winged *Illadopsis rufescens*, is endemic and considered 'near-threatened' by Collar and Stuart⁵ and in *Birds to Watch* 2⁴.

Illadopsises are almost always the epitome of the 'dull-brown bird', but the notable exception is Black-capped *I. cleaveri*, which is strikingly different but still confusable with Brown-chested Alethe *Alethe poliocephala*, a small thrush similar to the illadopsises in size and actions. Thus we include the latter species in this study as an 'honorary illadopsis'.

General behaviour

All five illadopsises are medium-sized babblers which frequent the ground and/or lower storey or secondary bush in the forest zone. They are normally seen in dense masses of creepers less than two metres above the ground, grating or scolding calls often belying their presence. They are similar to American thrushes *Catbarus*, nightingales *Luscinia* and antwrens *Myrmotherula* and are sometimes included in the genus *Trichastoma*, a group that occurs throughout South-East Asia⁷.

As a rule 'pishing' elicits a response from these birds. However, because of their volatile nature, the observer rarely gets more than just frustrating glimpses of the bird, with the identification being the product of a composite of brief views.

Table 1 Biometrics of the illadopsises of the Upper Guinea region and Brown-chested Alethe
Tableau 1 Biométrie des Grives-Akalat de la région de Haute Guinée et Alèthe à poitrine brune

Mean values are shown for each sex separately⁶. M=male F=female.

			Weight (g)	Wing (mm)	Tail (mm)	Bill (mm)
GROUP I						
B-c Alethe	<i>Alethe poliocephala</i>	M	32.7	84	52	17
		F	31.9	83	52	17
Black-capped	<i>Illadopsis cleaveri</i>	M	26.9	73	53	18
		F	25.6	71	52	17
GROUP II						
Pale-breasted	<i>I. rufipennis</i>	M	32.7	73	54	18
		F	27.6	68	50	17
Brown	<i>I. fulvescens</i>	M	25.4	79	61	20
		F	27.2	74	57	20
GROUP III						
Rufous-winged	<i>I. rufescens</i>	M	34.7	81	63	19
		F	34.2	78	59	19
Puvel's	<i>I. puveli</i>	M	43	90	68	20
		F	38.6	81	62	19

Identification

We favour splitting these six species into three pairs, Groups I, II and III. Separation of Group I is simply based upon a single field character, however the species in Groups II and III are more similar to each other and separation relies upon a more in-depth field impression.

Separating groups

Group I

Brown-chested Alethe *Alethe poliocephala*

Black-capped Illadopsis *I. cleaveri*

The forehead and crown of both species is black or very dark appearing black in many light conditions, but is visible even in the most brief of views. There is a pale supercilium in both species although in the field this varies in clarity.

Group II

Pale-breasted Illadopsis *I. rufipennis*

Brown Illadopsis *I. fulvescens*

Crown and nape medium brown with a rufous tinge in some lights. Underparts dusky, dirty pale-brown, barely contrasting with the upperparts in poor light, but a clearly contrasting white throat. Legs and feet dusky grey-brown. The legs are short and rather weak looking, relative to Group III species. Dumpier shape and smaller size than Group III species combine to give a jizz which is quite distinctive once one becomes familiar with the species. Both species normally stay off the ground, skulking in vegetation, often perching on vertical stems with a mostly horizontal carriage of

the body. A race of Brown Illadopsis *I. f. moloneyanum* occurring in the eastern part of the Upper Guinea has a completely brown throat⁹. Although we have no experience of this race we assume that this feature distinguishes it from other illadopsises in the region.

Group III

Rufous-winged Illadopsis *I. rufescens*

Puvel's Illadopsis *I. puveli*

Crown and nape rich rufous-brown. Underparts creamy or clean-white with an ill-defined breast band, the latter only visible with good views of the underparts. Throat not markedly contrasting with rest of underparts, but underparts contrast with the upperparts visible even in poor light. Legs and feet pale-coloured (pale yellow or pinky-flesh) which emphasises their longer and stronger look, relative to Group II species. Eye large, round and dark in contrast to Group II species. Larger than Group II species. Active and skulking, often on the ground, but will freely perch in saplings, particularly when disturbed; normally uses horizontal perches, having an upright stance making them more reminiscent of thrushes *Turdus* spp in actions.

Specific identification

Group I

Separation of these two species is not too difficult, the pattern of the face contrasting with the crown and throat being the best feature (Table 2).

Table 2 Plumage characters useful in the identification of Group I species

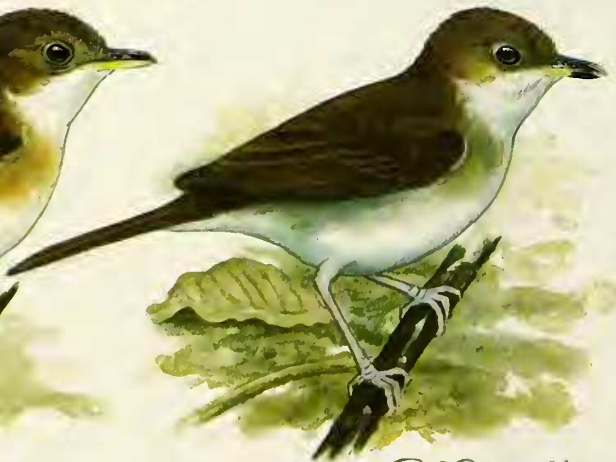
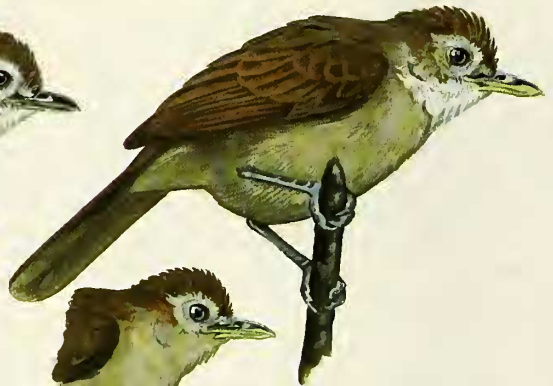
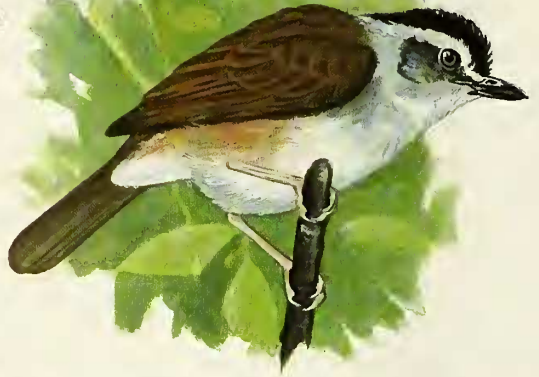
Tableau 2 Caractéristiques du plumage utilisées pour l'identification des espèces du Groupe I

	Black-capped Illadopsis	Brown-chested Alethe
Crown	black	dark olive-grey
Supercilium	broad grey	fine pale grey
Lores	white	dark
Ear-coverts	dark grey	dark brown
Moustachial stripe	pale grey	dark brown
Throat	white	white
Breast	diffuse grey breast band	diffuse peachy-brown breast band
Flanks	rich mid-brown	pale grey-brown
Upperparts	olive-brown	chestnut-brown

Black-capped Illadopsis

Polytypic, subspecies: *cleaveri* and *johnsoni*

Upperparts olive-brown contrasting with black crown, which extends onto the nape. Crown contrasts with white lores, which continue into a well-defined long, broad, pale-grey supercilium. Ear-coverts dark grey contrasting with pale grey moustachial which grades



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into the white throat. Underparts dirty white with rich brown flanks (difficult to see) and diffuse grey breast band.

Habits: normally seen singly or in pairs, but has been recorded in groups of up to eight². Most often seen on or within one metre of the ground. Volatile and skulking with a horizontal carriage of the body. Noisy.

Habitat: primary and secondary forest.

Brown-chested Alethe

Polytypic, subspecies: *poliocephala*

Upperparts chestnut brown. Flight feathers blackish-brown with chestnut fringes. Crown dark olive-grey just extending onto nape, appearing black in poor light. Fine pale grey supercilium, ill defined and not extending beyond the ear-coverts. Throat white, contrasting with dark lores, moustachio-malar area, breast and ear-coverts. Underparts dirty creamy-white with diffuse peachy-brown breast-band, which can be difficult to see. Flanks pale grey-brown not contrasting markedly with rest of underparts. The colour combination of the mantle, crown and supercilium is distinctive which, with experience, allows separation on very incomplete views.

Habits: normally seen singly or in pairs, feeding off the ground up to three metres. Very distinct 'wing-waving' action, rapidly raising one or both wings to the vertical exposing a pale underwing. This action is frequently repeated when agitated. If disturbed flies low for some distance, perches low down and then remains motionless in an upright stance. Almost always silent, no loud or distinct calls recorded.

Habitat: primary and secondary forest, and scrubby bush.

Group II

Separation of these two species presents the most difficult identification problem when dealing with

illadopsises in the Upper Guinea region. Correct identification hinges upon good views of the underparts, particularly of the belly between the legs (Table 3), which is best seen when the bird is perched on a vertical or near-vertical branch.

Table 3 Plumage characters used for identification of species in Group II

Tableau 3 Caractéristiques du plumage utilisées pour l'identification des espèces du Groupe II

	Pale-breasted	Brown
Throat	white	white*
Upper-breast and Flanks	dirty-brown	dirty buffy-brown
Belly and vent	pale greyish-white	dirty buffy-brown
Under tail-coverts	dirty-brown	dirty buffy-brown

*but brown in the race of Brown Illadopsis *I. f. moloneyanum* which occurs in the eastern part of the Upper Guinea region

Pale-breasted Illadopsis

Polytypic, subspecies: *extrema*

Whole upperparts, including ear-coverts and lores, drab mid-brown with a variable rufous tinge. Throat white, often puffed out when alarmed or inquisitive (other species might also do this). Rest of underside dirty pale-brown except for the belly and vent which is pale greyish-white, contrasting with the breast, flanks and undertail coverts. This pale area can be difficult to see, particularly in poor light, but it is the only reliable field character that separates this species from Brown Illadopsis. Overall Pale-breasted often appears to have a greater contrast in tone between the upper and undersides than Brown Illadopsis.

Habits: normally found in pairs or small groups of up to five birds, in vegetation off the ground by up to two metres. Keeps to dense tangles, skulking out of sight. Groups are particularly noisy giving scolding *chacks* and grating *churs*.

Habitat: primary and secondary forest. Occasionally associated with ant columns.

Brown Illadopsis

Polytypic, subspecies: *gularis* and *moloneyanum*

Western race *gularis*

Whole of upperparts, ear coverts and lores drab mid-brown with a variable rufous tinge. Throat white. Rest of underside uniform dirty buffy-brown. No contrast between belly and surrounding feather tracts. This is the most difficult species to identify positively since it is very difficult indeed to be certain that the belly area is not a pale colour, as light conditions can mask the contrasting underparts of Pale-breasted.

Plate 1

left (*à gauche*)

top	Brown-chested Alethe <i>Alethe poliocephala</i>
<i>en haut</i>	<i>Alèthe à poitrine brune</i>
centre	Pale-breasted Illadopsis <i>Illadopsis rufipennis</i>
<i>au centre</i>	<i>Grive-akalat à poitrine blanche</i>
bottom	Puvel's Illadopsis <i>I. puveli</i>
<i>en bas</i>	<i>Grive-akalat de Puvel</i>

right (*à droite*)

top	Black-capped Illadopsis <i>I. cleaveri</i>
<i>en haut</i>	<i>Grive-akalat à tête noire</i>
centre	Brown Illadopsis <i>I. fulvescens</i>
<i>au centre</i>	<i>Grive-akalat brune</i>
bottom	Rufous-winged Illadopsis <i>I. rufescens</i>
<i>en bas</i>	<i>Grive-akalat du Libéria</i>

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Eastern race *moloneyanum*

The only illadopsis in the region with a brown throat which does not contrast with the rest of the underparts. This subspecies is restricted to eastern Ghana and Togo^{8,9}.

Habits: seen in pairs or small groups, similar to Pale-breasted but normally seen in the lowest one metre of the understorey, and occasionally alights on the ground. Similarly noisy when encountered.

Habitat: primary and secondary forest, and well-developed scrub.

Group III

These two species are easily separable by habitat, but underpart colouration is the best plumage character (Table 4).

Table 4 Plumage characters used for field identification of Group III species

Table 4 Caractéristiques du plumage utilisées pour l'identification des espèces du Groupe III

	Puvel's	Rufous-winged
Throat	slightly creamy white	clean white
Upper breast	diffuse warm peachy-buff breast-band	diffuse brownish-grey breast band
Lower breast	white with a creamy tinge	clean greyish-white
Flanks	as breast band	clean mid-grey
Upper Mandible	wholly dark horn	wholly dark horn
Lower Mandible	normally wholly pale yellowish-horn; occasionally brownish-horn on gonys	pale yellowish basal inner third to half remainder dark horn

Puvel's Illadopsis

Polytypic, subspecies: *puveli*

Upperparts rufous-brown contrasting with creamy white underparts. Breast has a diffuse warm peachy-buff breast-band, looking almost orange in good light.

Habits: a wholly ground-dwelling bird, occasionally hopping up onto low open branches in the manner of a thrush *Turdus* sp. Normally seen singly or in pairs.

Habitat: a bird of secondary scrub and gallery forest.

Rufous-winged Illadopsis

Monotypic

Upperparts rufous-brown contrasting with cold greyish flanks and white underparts. Dusky grey-brown breast-band, sometimes incomplete, is distinctive but not easy to see except when seen head-on in reasonable light. The differences in bill colouration (see Table 4) are only of use in confirming the identification when good views are obtained.

The very distinctive, far-carrying call of this species can be delivered from the ground or a high perch, the individual often rapidly moving around its territory when doing so. Puvel's has been reported as having a similar call (GD Field pers. comm.) but that on Chappuis' discs³ bears little resemblance and Puvel's recorded in Sierra Leone is similarly distinct¹.

Habits: as Puvel's.

Habitat: closed-canopy forest only.

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